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ABSTRACT

Phonics instruction alone cannot fully develop students' ability to comprehend a text or story. Reading instruction should emphasize students interaction with print, compensating for lower level skills with higher level skills, and gaining meaning and knowledge throughout the process. Too often, teachers give minimal attention to the development of strategies for comprehending and focus on the parts of language instead of the whole. Furthermore, there are many exceptions to phonics rules, which provide additional confusion when attempting to apply those skills to a reading situation. Phonics skills must be taught within a meaningful context, allowing students to see themselves as active readers and writers in a scribal world. Teachers can best achieve a balanced approach between phonics and context by using children's literature in the classroom. (Contains 15 references.) (RS)

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EFFECTIVE PHONICS INSTRUCTION

Jackie Easley

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EFFECTIVE PHONICS INSTRUCTION

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Effective Phonics Instruction

You take your books and bring them up with your pencils. You do your papers and get reading seatwork when you are done. Then you go back to your seats. Then you go back to the paper you are working on when you're done writing your name. After that paper, you go to the next one. When you're done with those, you go on to the next one until the last one is done. Then put them in her basket. That's what reading in school is.

-Stephanie, First Grade Student (Michel, 1994, p. 36)

The above quotation reflects one child's view of reading in school. This despairing perspective seems to typify many school children's concepts of classroom reading instruction. While learning skills (what Stephanie terms "seatwork") is an important component of developing reading proficiency, it is not the **only** strategy that students need to master. Educators need to remain focused on the main goal of reading instruction: comprehension. Phonics instruction alone cannot fully develop students' ability to comprehend a text or story. Reading instruction should, therefore, emphasize students' interaction with print, compensating for lower level skills (decoding, etc.) with higher level skills (context, etc.), and gaining meaning and knowledge throughout the process.

Few experts advocate removing phonics from reading programs. "The question is no longer *if* phonics should be taught, but rather *how* phonics should be taught meaningfully" (Routman, 1991, p. 147). According to Routman, several problems exist when teaching phonics as a separate, isolated subject. One of the most significant problems is that many emergent readers fail to make the connection between the sounds they are learning and reading a text for meaning. Too often, teachers give minimal attention to the development of strategies for comprehending, especially the use of semantic and syntactic clues. Instead, the focus is on the parts of language, not on the whole (or sum of its parts). Such an emphasis on skills in isolation can lead to, at best, focusing on comprehension as a secondary process, or at worst, not focusing on comprehension at all.

Furthermore, there are many exceptions to phonics rules, which provide additional confusion when attempting to apply those skills to a reading situation. Frank Smith cautions against relying on such an unreliable system.

"I think it would be difficult to exaggerate the complexity and unreliability of phonics. To take just one very simple example, how are the letters *ho* pronounced? Not in a trick situation, as in the middle of a word like *shop*, but when *ho* are the first letters of a word? Here are eleven common words in each of which the initial *ho* has a different pronunciation-*hot, hope, hook, hoot, house, hoist, horse, horizon, honey, hour, honest.* Can anyone really believe that a child could learn to identify any of these words by sounding out the letters?"

-(Smith, 1979, as cited in Jewell and Zintz, 1990, pp. 96-97)

Finally, children need to see the purpose for learning phonics elements. Emergent readers and writers must be allowed to make sense of print with "print that makes sense in the first place" (Jewell and Zintz, 1990, p. 100). They may be excellent decoders, but if they do not learn the skills within a meaningful context, they most likely will not read to comprehend. Unfortunately, when faced with a wide range of reading abilities in their classrooms, many teachers focus on isolated phonics skills as the primary method of additional instruction to struggling readers. According to Keith Stanovich (1986), this only fosters the lack of both ability and motivation among poorer readers. Furthermore, Stanovich asserts that "interactive-compensatory processing occurs at the word level, and that when word identification is slow, the reader can draw on higher-level knowledge sources (e.g., prior contextual constraints) to aid recognition" (Stanovich, 1980, p. 58). Teaching phonics as an isolated skill seems to perpetuate the indifference children have toward reading. Recent studies have been dedicated to changing such views toward reading, attempting to motivate children who *can* read, but don't (Cramer, 1993).

Phonics instruction is obviously an important function of the reading process. Students need to acquire this skill to aid in their reading. However, these skills must be taught within a meaningful context, allowing students to see themselves as active readers and writers in a scribal world (Purves, 1990). Therefore, teachers can best achieve a balanced approach between phonics and context by using children's literature in the classroom. Current children's literature provides meaningful settings, rich language, and engaging stories to enhance the reading lesson. This framework also provides a meaningful setting for learning the necessary skills, taking language as a whole, examining its parts, and then returning back to the whole, applying the skill to new, whole texts (Trachtenburg, 1990).

I recently asked a group of parents why they enjoy reading. Their answers included: gaining information, learning how to do something, escaping from reality, acquiring knowledge. Interestingly, none of them said, "Because I like to decode words." Likewise, our students will not choose a book for silent reading, thinking, "This book looks like it has a lot of great words to decode!" Rather, they will choose books that have been shared with the class and examined closer for a needed skill. Students will also most likely be more attentive during those lessons, as they will perceive the skill as worthwhile if they are to read that book later on their own.

Teaching phonics in context is analogous to Ed Young's story of The Seven Blind Mice (1992). In this fable, each blind mouse takes his turn in examining a large creature, trying to identify it. The problem is that each mouse examines only a part of it; and it is not until one mouse studies the whole object that the mice achieve true understanding: the creature is an elephant. The moral of the story is: "Knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole" (Young, 1992, p. 43). That is also an effective moral for phonics instruction.

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